

PAAN: A SOCIAL INSTITUTION AMONG THE NOCTE TRIBE OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

The term 'Paan' is referred to the social institution or dormitory found in the Nocte society. This study is attempted to highlight on the dormitory system of the Nocte tribe of Tirap district, Arunachal Pradesh in India. This social institution played a vital role in the social life of the tribe since the early days to the present life. Among the Noctes it is the centre of the village authority in which the matter related to village life is begun and end here. It also acted as centre of learning of the folk-culture of the tribe. Here, its role and relevance in the contemporary social life is explained. This paper is prepared based on historical studies. The purpose of studying this subject is to identify the importance of its existence in the contemporary society.

KEY WORDS: Nocte, Paan, social institution, Folk-culture, Relevance, Historical.

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INTRODUCTION

The Nocte are inhabited in the central part of Tirap district, which lies between the Tirap River in the east, Tissa River in the west and the Patkai hills to the south. The state of Assam forms the northern boundary. "The total area covered by Tirap district is 2,862 sq. km. It is situated in the location between 26° 30' N and 17° 47' N latitude to 96° 10' E and 65° 40' E longitude. The total population of the Noctes, according to the census 2011 was 60,097"¹ "The literacy rate (excluding age group 0-6) is 52.01%. The sex ratio (female per 1000 males) is 911 and the density of the population is 42 per sq. km."² However, it goes on changing due to the expansion of the household.

The district derives its name from the principal river 'the Tirap' which flows through the main land starting from the south to the north until it falls into the Noa-Dehing River in Assam. The land has a picturesque beauty of its own.

In many parts of the tribal society, dormitory is a common feature all over the world. In some society, there is a separate dormitory for both boys and girls. Sahu quotes, "the dormitory is an organized institution among the tribal which has certain codes and conduct approved by their society"³. Therefore, dormitory is a sort of common platform for the bachelor in which the traditional lore is learned. Besides, folk songs, folk stories and folk crafts are also learning in this institution. According to Mackenzie the dormitory system of the Noctes – "each village had a large building or morung, where hung a hollow tree that was beaten to give the alarm of an enemy's

approach. In the morung, the skulls of slain foes also kept. In one morung, *Brodie* counted 130 of these trophies.”⁴ In the early works on the Noctes, dormitory is referred as morung, which is called among the Nagas tribe of Nagaland. In Nocte dialect, it is called as ‘*paang*’. In fact, both boys’ and girls’ dormitory were existed in the early society. However, girl’s dormitory was in existence in some villages namely *Kheti*, and *Lapnan*.

Wangpha states that it was a village meeting house, a house for social and cultural activities for the whole village. The youths from the village used the paang (dormitory) to sleep at night. They had interacted and learnt the art of living from one another in the paang.⁵

The role of dormitory is vital in the society because it acts as learning institutes of folk culture and center of village authority. The youths learn folk crafts, songs, oral history, customs and so forth in the village dormitory with the elder. Similar statement was given by *Marak*, “the *Dhumkuria (jonkherpa)* dormitory thus has educational, economic and public functions. The participation of the members of the *Dhumkuria* in various ceremonies and rituals like hunting, festivals and ‘*Jatra*’ festival is important. An *Oram tribe (Chotanagpur)* child learns folk songs, folk tales, and tribal customs in this very institution.”⁶

The term dormitory in the Nocte society is hard to define in concrete manner because it plays as common platform of the youths in which they learn folk culture of their society. *Dutta* quotes, “Morung (paang) formerly were guard-house where the young bachelors mounted guard day and night, well-equipped with all the weapons of war. As guard house for the village, morung were constructed by the entrances to an enemy. But now-a- days, they have been moved inside the village.”⁷ Here it also acts as court of village authority or house of village security which plays for multi- purposes of the village. Similarly, dormitory of *Garo* tribe of *Meghalay* state called it as *Nokpante* as mentioned in the books. “A *Nokpante* is a place where the youths of the village are trained in the art of living. Life in the *Nokpante* is an education in the art of living. In *Nokpante*, a young men learns to mould himself into an all round personality develop understanding of himself and is place in society and in the World”⁸. Therefore, it is not appropriate to term as bachelor dormitory because not only the youths rather all male members of village participate in the activities launched in the dormitory. The number of dormitory varies from one village to another in the society as follows. “in *Khonsa* village, there are two dormitories namely *Paangdong* and *Khela sum paang*; Four paang in *Borduria* village- *paangdong*, *Matey sum paang*, *Lothong sum paang* and *Monchang sum paang*; Six paangs in *Kaimai* village- *Paangdong*, *Lothong paang*, *Lamra paang*, *Hamong paang*, *Hokong paang*, *Hachak paang*, and *Tingtaan paang*. Twenty two paangs in *Lazu* village, and seven paangs in *Lapnan* village out of which one is common dormitory called as *Ponyu paang*, one is clan’s dormitory namely *Poosa paang*, and rest five dormitories are girl’s paang, viz. *Bangnya jam*, *Chimnya jam*, *Tainya jam*, *Sunya jam*, and *Chunya*

jam”⁹. However, the number of dormitory in each village is gradually decreasing in the present society because the roles and functions of clan’s dormitory are merged with *paangdong* (common dormitory). Moreover, the youths who used to look after dormitory in the early society is not possible for new generation are engaged in studies and job. For example, now in Kaimai village there is only one dormitory out of six in the early society.

The design of dormitory is different from the dwelling house. It has a one large hall without any partition wall. The design of floor, which is made of splitting bamboos, is different from common house lying intersecting with overlapping each other. Roof is made of palm leaf. The construction of dormitory is done by every male members of the household. *Khephiak* says there is a custom for the young boys to perform a ritual called ‘*Chamkat*’ to entry in the dormitory. It is a part of compulsory irrespective of small boys or old man to participate in the community work. Moreover, after *Chamkat* a person become a full-fledge member of dormitory. A person have right to claim any share as disburse from the community property or any other thing that may receive as for common.¹⁰

Inside dormitory there is one big log drum called *Tham* in Nocte. It is used for multi-purposes in the village. The signal of each occasion or celebration is given with beating this Log drum in the village. *Ngongman* explains that in festival, ten to fifteen *paangmi* (youth) beat this drum with small carving wood standing round and facing each other. However, one has to get trained to play this drum because it needs an expertise the way how and when to beat start and stop. Besides, all men have to adjust the toning while playing it.¹¹ The toning of each occasion is played in different from one another. *N.Tesia* narrates that when fire accident is taken place in the village then some men or youths rush towards dormitory to beat the log drum in order to inform the villagers. It signify that some incident was taken place within the village so accordingly villagers keep themselves alert. Similarly, when wild animals like tiger, bear, leopard, and elephant are hunted then they first go straight to dormitory and beat the log drum so that people must know it. The people automatically know the incident after hearing the tone of beating drum especially if it is beaten during unusual time.¹² Thus, it plays as an alarm in the village. *Dutta* mentions, “In each morung a log drum, called ‘*Tham*’ is kept invariably on one side of the hall. Formerly the log drum was an instrument used to give signals of danger, but today it is more often played in revelry then to give signal of danger such as in sudden outbreaks of fire, or to announce the killing of some big game such as tiger, bear etc. there are different notes or rhythms played on the drum to communicate different messages. Human skulls collected during head-hunting are also kept in a particular place in the morung.”¹³

In past, there were clan’s dormitories in the Nocte village where all the activities related to the clan were discussed. However, in general issues of a village, it is discussed in the common dormitory (*paangdong*) led by the chief and the council. However, in the post- independence period clan’s dormitories were gradually decaying due to lack of

members to maintain them. Today most of the people are either staying in town or engaged in job.

Since decades, every meeting used to hold in dormitory except for minor cases. The village authority is passed in dormitory by chief along with village council in the presence of villagers. However, the major cases of village are installed in dormitory whether it is individual or group. *Thingbam* or village security in the Nocte society was existed since the days when headhunting was in vogue. The term “*THINGBAM*” is derived from two words, *THING*- meaning place and *BAM* is to guard. In the village, several groups are constituted to perform the duty of village security. It is performed in alternate among the groups. In Kaimai village, there are four *sums* (groups) namely *Hachak sum*, *Lowang sum*, *Khetey sum*, and *Ngoatjoan sum*. However, the duty of village security is now less responsible in comparison to the early times. Now the duty is to watch fire in the hearth of village house when they left for field. Besides any accident that take place in the village. However, in early society they were keeping busy in watching enemy within or outside village.

There is a ritual in the society to enter young boys as full-fledge member in the dormitory. Until this ritual is performed village youths are not entitled to enlist as a member of the village. There is no age limit for this ritual however, it depends upon the individual whether he qualify to participate in the community work or not. It is performed during festival in which the youth whosoever observes this ritual are brought to dormitory by their clan’s members or *phowa* * in Nocte dialect. In the dormitory they are publicly declared as competent member of village activities. There is one ‘Paangmi Khapho’ (head among the youths in dormitory). He leads the youths in all activities in the village. This ritual is still being practiced in the Nocte villages with some modification. Early it was performed in *Cham Ho*.** However, now this ritual is performed in the village for convenient of the villager.

Girl’s dormitory was also prevalent in some Nocte village like in *Kheti* and *Lapnan* as already mentioned in the previous paragraph. Similarly, they also perform ritual to enlist as a member of village girl. In some village, *JANCHHO KHE** is performed during festival in dormitory. However, in some villages perform the same ritual are performed in *Ju hum* * of a village. Dutta mentions, “When a girl attains puberty, a ritual called “*janchho khe*” is performed. The girls give a chicken and some rice beer to the *paang* of her *sum* (group). From this day, a girl who has called *Leti* or *Lechi* becomes *Janchho* (young maiden) in the girl’s *morung*”¹⁴ Nevertheless, a girl’s dormitory is abolished in the present society.

Despite of some changes in dormitory, it is still played a commendable job in the society without which there is no common platform to uphold the village authority. In fact, community Hall is another platform in the village for meetings and other purposes, which is the recent phenomenon. However, it is used rare in comparison to dormitory because the sanctity which is in the latter is not attached to the former. Moreover, the attachments of village old men are more with the aged old dormitory, introduced by their ancestors. Thus, their consciences do not permit them to detach from the sacred place.

In the past, the youths of village used to sleep in dormitory with well equipped weapons for security. However, this culture is not upheld today because there is no necessary to escort the village at night as it was in the early society. Tesia says that earlier dormitory was very important platform for socio-political activities of village. However, its functions are gradually declined in the present society due to the advent of modernity where people are keeping themselves in personal job or business. Despite of its present position, important issues is still placed and decided in dormitory.¹⁵

“The sitting MLA, Sri Thajam Aboh inaugurated a paang (dormitory) at Dadom village about 29 KM from Khonsa on 17 oct. 2007. In his inaugural address, he said that the paang is one of the unique traditional institutions of the Noctes which has a great importance and significance and asked the people to preserve it. He reiterates that no effort should be spared to maintain the age-old traditional systems that can help in building a just and peaceful society.”¹⁶

The relevance of dormitory in the Nocte society is still existed though it does not play an effective role as it was in the early society. In fact, without its existence there is no platform to preserve the aged old customs and to mobilize any activities of the village. The participation and activities of youths however is gradually declined in dormitory due to the advancement of educational institutions. Besides, most of them are engaged in Govt. jobs and business. In the early times the absentees are imposed fines of rice beer and Rs.10. However, now fine is taken in case only i.e. of Rs.50. Hence, dormitory is necessary to administer the village activities. It plays as a guiding force to maintain a healthy society and this aged old customs must be preserved. Besides, it also acts as common platform to share their views and discuss on any matters independently.

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- *Paanmi is a term, which uses to recognize village boys after performing ritual, called Chamkat.
10. Interview with Khephiak Khetey, from Kaimai village in Tirap District, 26.08.2005.
11. Interview with Ngonman Kakho from Paniduria village in Tirap District, 06.08.2004.
12. Interview with N.Tesia from Hakhun village in Tirap District, 12.09.2005.

13. Dutta, *Op. cit.*, p. 58.

* *PHOWA*- it is a group of mix clans within which a marriage cannot take place. For instance, in Kaimai village there are some 'Phowas' like Lowang Phowa, Raan Phowa, and Bosa Phowa.

**CHAMHO*- it is a place in little bit distance from village, which use to observe a ritual called 'Chamkat' for young boys.

**Janchho khe*- a ritual observes by young girls of village to recognize them as mature and competent to participate in community works.

**Ju hum* - a village house select during festival for preparation of local rice beer.

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